

Meeting Michael Jackson

I got to meet Michael Jackson twice in the early 80's. By "meet" I don't mean that I went to his home for dinner, but I was right next to him on a couple of photo shoots, so I think it counts.

When I moved to Los Angeles in 1981, I immediately started calling photographers I admired to try to get jobs as an assistant. With a lot of determination and persistence, I ended up working on a freelance basis for a lot of photographers, specializing in many different fields.

In photo school, a lot of us aspired to become fashion photographers, mostly because of the amazing images we saw in the editorial sections of magazines such as Vogue. What I didn't realize at the time is that those photos represented about one percent of what happens in the actual fashion photography business, the rest being the commerce of selling clothing. I thought it was all about beautiful women and creative photography, when it really turned out to be about clothing, and I had no interest in that. I quickly discovered this after assisting a few fashion photographers and decided that would not be my calling.

The other area I tried out was food photography, and in a short time I discovered I just didn't have enough patience. Long days in a dark studio watching a stylist rearrange drops of water on a tomato was of no interest to this 24 year old.

Architecture always interested me, and I worked for some of those shooters as well. At the time, we were using film cameras, so that meant we were often working at night to control the various types of lights inside the buildings. One exposure had to be taken with only the fluorescent lights on, filtered with gels appropriately, because otherwise they turned out green. Then all the fluorescent lights would have to be turned off, and the tungsten lights illuminated, again gelled for their specific color balance. And all that was just for one exposure! It was very tedious and technical, and again something I just didn't have the patience to deal with.

I also worked for some celebrity photographers, and that was more fun. We shot Gladys Knight, without the Pips, in the studio, and did shoots in the homes of celebs such as Burt Bacharach and Dorothy Hamill, to name a few. They were all very nice to us.

I also assisted a photographer, Sam, who worked in the music business and had a drug problem. That was interesting. One day we photographed the members of Fleetwood Mac in the studio while they were recording their album "Tusk". Christine McVie had a small vial of cocaine she kept on a chain around her neck and offered some to Sam, whom she had evidently known for a long time. He declined, possibly because he was on a job. After the shoot, he and I went to lunch with Lindsey Buckingham and I just sat there and listened, soaking it all in.

Sam would also do head shots in a small rented studio. We photographed people like Casey Kasem, Carl Wilson of the Beach Boys, and an actress named Holland Taylor. She took a liking to me, and I got invited to come hang out with her on the set of a TV show she was working on called "Bosom Buddies". I've always enjoyed being on movie and TV sets, and for some reason she was allowed to bring me right in with them, and I had dinner at a large table with the entire cast. One of the lead actors was very good at juggling, and in general, a really nice guy. He was an unknown actor my exact same age named Tom Hanks.

Sam was also the official photographer for the Grammy awards and he would bring me along as a second photographer. He would be busy backstage shooting the musicians while I was given a seat at the very front of the balcony. I had a camera with a long lens to photograph the winners when they came up to accept their awards. It was really the best seat in the house and I got to see some amazing performances. This was such a great job that I continued to do it for several years after I was no longer assisting. The Grammy Awards had the cream of the crop performing for their peers and a TV audience of millions. You name the biggest musical stars of the early 80's and they were there, singing and receiving awards: Linda Ronstadt, Bruce Springsteen, Paul Simon. I got to see one of the last live performances by Marvin Gaye. He sang "Sexual Healing" and got one of the longest standing ovations I've ever seen. It still gives me chills.

In 1982 Michael Jackson was in the studio creating what would become the "Thriller" album and they needed to come up with a cover photo. Michael had an outfit that he was planning to wear on stage that made his socks, wrist cuffs and chest glow in the dark. I think the idea was that he would come out on stage and all you would be able to see were those white parts as he danced, thus creating a really interesting effect. I was working for the great photographer Matthew Ralston at the time, and it was his job to figure out how to make this work in a still photo.

Michael arrived with a small entourage and I remember they brought special vegetarian food for him, and only played his music on the stereo. As was usual, I would stand in for the lighting tests, and then when everything looked just perfect on the Polaroids, Michael would be called in and we would switch places. We were about the same size, and he seemed very shy and quiet for someone who had such a huge personality when he sang and danced. He also had his normal nose and skin color back then. In the end, the whole idea of using that glowing outfit didn't work and the entire photo shoot was scrapped. The album cover ended up with a photo of Michael playing with a baby Tiger and was shot by a different photographer. That's show business.

Two years later, after the album had become a huge hit and sold 70 million copies, the Jackson 5 reunited for a tour that was sponsored by Pepsi. A TV commercial was

planned that would feature the band performing on stage, complete with smoke and pyrotechnics, in front of a live audience.

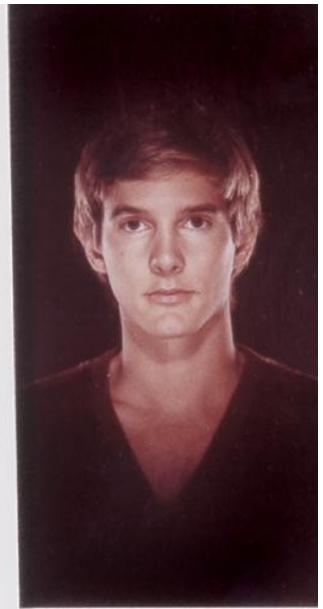
I now had my own business and had stopped assisting, but my photographer friend Ralph thought I might like to witness this event and brought me on as his assistant. Our main job was to set up a studio shot in the basement of the huge Shriner Auditorium in order to photograph the presentation of a \$5 million check from the president of Pepsi to Michael and his brothers. Ralph was a union photographer on movie sets and also a big practical joker. At one point he asked if he could see the check, saying that he had never held that much money in his life. Unbeknownst to the executive, Ralph had hidden some paper in his hand, and when they gave him the check he ripped up the other piece of paper. There was a brief look of horror from everyone, until they realized they had been duped. I guess it was too late to fire us, because the Jacksons quickly appeared and we got to work. While waiting for instructions, Michael was standing right next to me. I was wearing eyeglasses that were trendy at the time, but look ridiculous now, upon reflection. They were bright red and very obvious, and Michael said to me in his quiet, feminine-sounding voice, "those are really cool glasses". I asked if he wanted to try them on, but I guess he thought he couldn't possibly look as cool as me, so he demurred.

A short time later Ralph and I were in the auditorium, along with a thousand screaming fans, waiting for the Jacksons to appear on stage. Four of the brothers ran on, acting as if they were playing their instruments, as the music to "Billie Jean" thumped through the speakers. Then Michael appeared at the top of the set with a big explosion and walked down to his microphone. It seemed like a regular concert to me with lots of sparklers and smoke everywhere, and then all of a sudden someone ran in from the side of the stage, tackled Michael and pushed him to the floor. I thought perhaps a deranged fan had attacked him, but very quickly someone appeared with a fire extinguisher and set it off directly on Michael. The music stopped and the giant theater became instantly quiet. People started screaming after they realized what had happened. Something had gone wrong with the timing or location of one of the pyrotechnics, and the styling products in Michael's hair had caught fire. I was photographing the scene from up high with a wide lens, but Ralph was upfront and got a picture of flames emerging from Michael's head.

After what seemed like a very long time being treated by the paramedics backstage, Michael was finally wheeled past us on a gurney and I took some photos as he passed by. This was noticed by one of his handlers, who came over and made me remove and expose the film out of my camera. Ralph said since they were paying for it, there wasn't much I could do about it. It turned out to be a pretty serious burn and Michael later admitted this was when he became addicted to painkillers, and, evidently, plastic surgery. He was never the same after that day.



Michael Jackson







Michael on fire from behind